An excerpt from the Middle Discourses of the Buddha (MN 35)

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“Even an insentient post would tremble.”

Introduce the challenger: “Saccaka, the son of Jain parents, was a controversialist… deemed holy by many people.”

“I don’t see any ascetic or brahmin who would not shake and rock and tremble, sweating from the armpits, were I to take them on in debate—not a leader of an order... and not even one who claims to be a perfected one, a fully awakened Buddha.”

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Two Views of the Self

The Self is the Aggregates

An individual person's self is form… feeling… perception… choices… consciousness. Established on consciousness they brim with merit and wickedness.

The self is a solid, identifiable entity that is the basis of our actions.

The Aggregates are Not-Self

Form, feeling, perception, choices, and consciousness are impermanent. Form, feeling, perception, choices, and consciousness are not-self.

These components are transient phenomena that we experience, but they do not constitute a permanent, unchanging "self."

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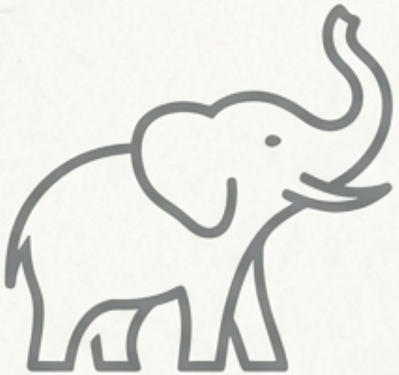
I will drag him to and fro like a fleecy sheep.

Saccaka rallies 500 Licchavis to witness the debate, boasting of his impending victory with a series of vivid analogies:

"Like a strong man would grab a **fleecy sheep** and drag it to and fro."

"Like a strong brewer's worker would toss a large **brewer's sieve** into a deep lake."



"Like a sixty-year-old **elephant** would plunge into a deep lotus pond and play a game of hemp-washing."

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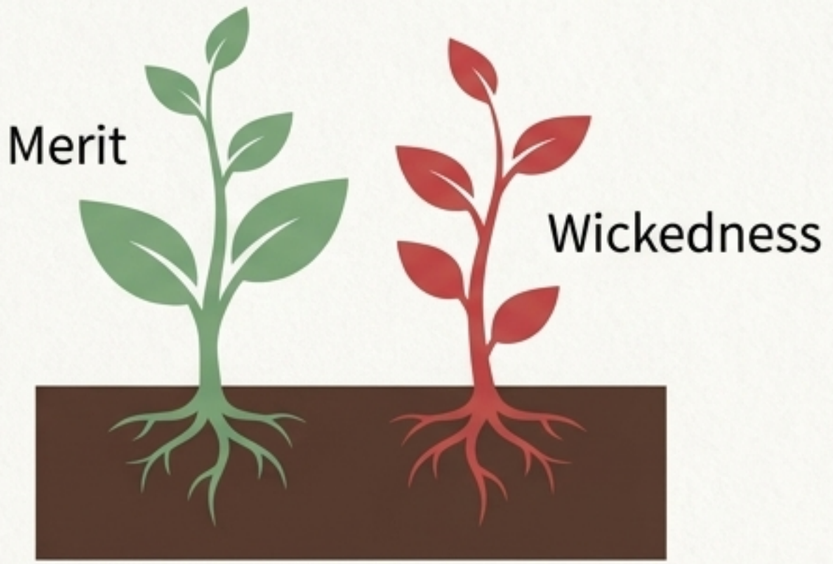
An Unwavering Calm

Escorted by the 500 Licchavis, Saccaka confronts the Buddha. He directly asks how the Buddha instructs his disciples. The Buddha confirms his teaching: the five aggregates are impermanent and not-self.



Saccaka's Analogy: "All the plants and seeds that achieve growth… do so depending on the earth. In the same way, an individual person's self is form. Established on form they brim with merit and wickedness."

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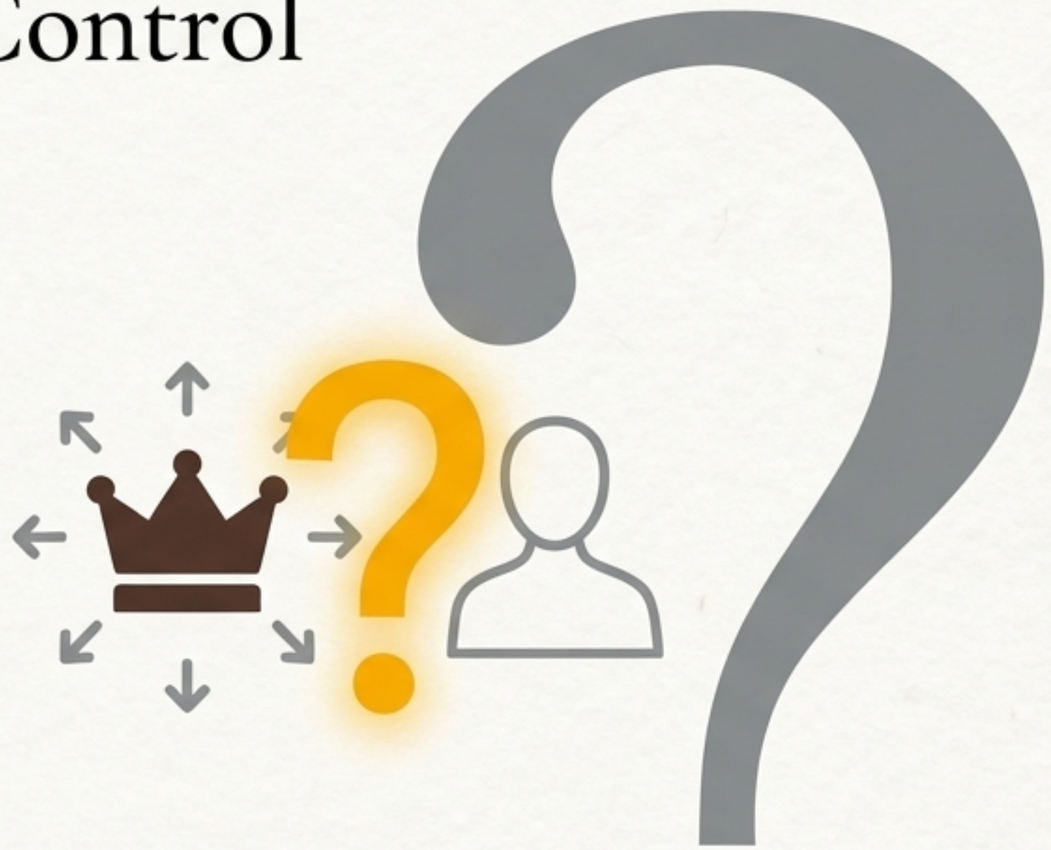
The Pivot to Control

The Buddha doesn’t argue against Saccaka’s “earth” analogy. Instead, he pivots with a clarifying question and a powerful counter-analogy.



The Buddha’s Clarification: “Aggivessana, are you not saying this: ‘Form is my self, feeling is my self… consciousness is my self’?”

The King Analogy: “Consider an anointed king… Would they have the power in their own realm to execute… fine… or banish those who have incurred banishment?”

Key Insight: “The Buddha establishes the central premise for his argument: if something is truly ‘self,’ one must have ultimate power and control over it, just as a king has power over his realm.”

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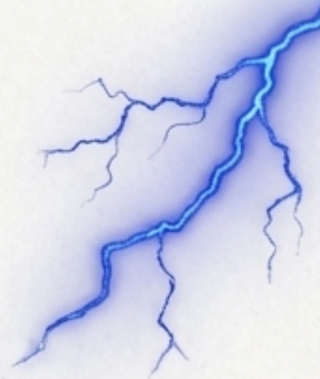
May my form be like this! May it not be like that.



The Killer Question: The Buddha asks, “When you say, ‘Form is my self,’ do you have power over that form to say: ‘May my form be like this! May it not be like that’?”

Saccaka falls silent twice. The spirit Vajirapāṇī appears, “taking up a burning iron thunderbolt,” threatening to “blow his head into seven pieces” if he doesn’t answer.

The Concession: Terrified, Saccaka finally answers:

“No, worthy Gotama.”

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A Cascade of Logic

The Buddha applies the same question of ultimate control to each of the five aggregates, the core components of Saccaka's self.

Do you have power over **feeling**?
No, worthy Gotama.

NO

Do you have power over **perception**?
No, worthy Gotama.

NO

Do you have power over **choices**?
No, worthy Gotama.

NO

Do you have power over **consciousness**?
No, worthy Gotama.

NO

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The Inescapable Conclusion

Having established that the five aggregates are not under our ultimate control, the Buddha presents a final, three-step argument:

Stage 1: Is form [feeling, etc.] permanent or impermanent?

→ **Impermanent.**

Stage 2: But if it's impermanent, is it suffering or happiness?

→ **Suffering.**

Stage 3: But if it's impermanent, suffering, and perishable, is it fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, I am this, this is my self'?"

→ **No, worthy Gotama.**

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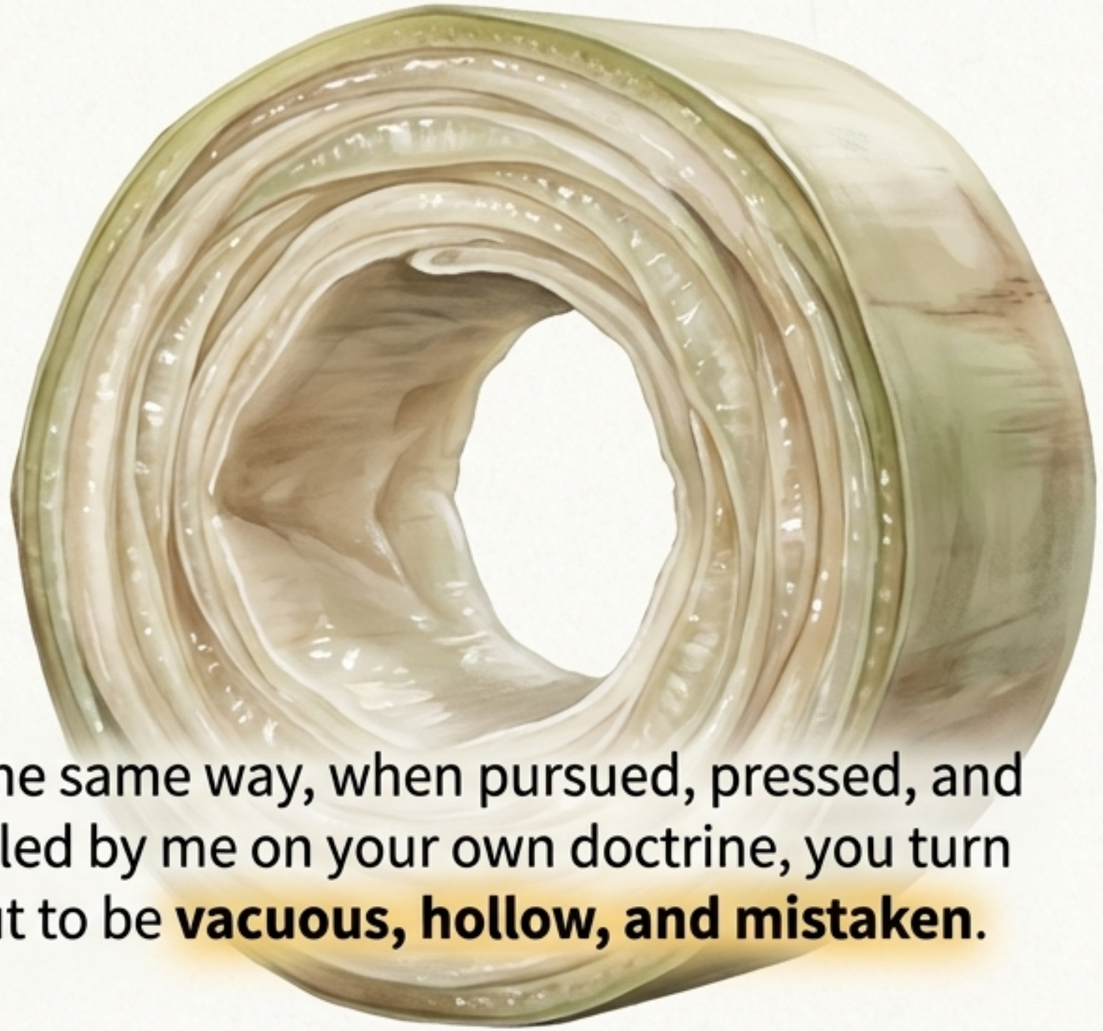
Seeking Heartwood in a Banana Trunk

Suppose…
a person in need of heartwood…
they'd see a big banana trunk…

They'd cut it down…
and unroll the coiled sheaths.

But they wouldn't even find sapwood,
much less heartwood.



In the same way, when pursued, pressed, and grilled by me on your own doctrine, you turn out to be **vacuous, hollow, and mistaken**.

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From Boasting to Silence

“Even an insentient post would tremble…”

Saccaka sat silent, dismayed, shoulders drooping, downcast, depressed, with nothing to say.

“Sweat is pouring from your forehead… While I now have no sweat on my body.”
The Buddha then reveals his golden body to the assembly.

The Licchavi Dummukha adds: “The Buddha has snapped, cracked, and broken off all Saccaka’s twists… like boys breaking off the claws of a crab.”

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How then, does a disciple follow?

Saccaka dismisses his earlier arguments as “just a bit of nonsense” and asks the Buddha two genuine questions:

2. “But how do you define a mendicant who is a perfected one, with defilements ended… and is rightly freed through enlightenment?”

1.“How do you define a disciple of the worthy Gotama who follows instructions… has gone beyond doubt…and is independent of others in the Teacher’s instructions?”

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The Heart of Right Understanding

The key is to see any kind of form, feeling, perception, choices, or consciousness—past, future, or present—with the understanding:

“This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self.”

The Disciple: Sees this with right understanding and “becomes independent of others in the Teacher’s instructions.”

The Perfected One: Sees this with right understanding and is “freed by not grasping.”

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From Aggression to Generosity

Saccaka's Confession:

"Worthy Gotama, it was rude and impudent of me to imagine I could attack you in debate. For a person might find safety after after **attacking** a rutting elephant… a blazing mass of fire… or a poisonous viper, but not after attacking the worthy Gotama."

The Offering: In a complete change of heart, Saccaka invites the Buddha and the entire assembly of monks for a meal the next day. The Buddha consents with silence.

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The Nature of a Gift

The next day, after Saccaka has served the meal, he offers the merit of the gift to “the happiness of the donors.”

The Buddha clarifies the karmic consequence of the act:

Whatever comes from giving to a recipient... who is **not free** of greed, hate, and delusion—**will accrue to the donors.**

Whatever comes from giving to a recipient... who **is free** of greed, hate, and delusion—**will accrue to you.**

The ultimate benefit of an action is determined by the purity of the recipient. Saccaka’s humble offering to a fully awakened being becomes his own reward.

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